

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 NEW DELHI 001224

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/15/2015

TAGS: [PREL](#) [EAID](#) [ETRD](#) [CE](#) [IN](#)

SUBJECT: INDIA RIDING HIGH ON POST-TSUNAMI WAVE OF GOOD
WILL; BIG PLANS FOR SRI LANKA

Classified By: PolCouns Geoff Pyatt. Reasons 1.4 (B, D)

1. (C) Summary: As a concrete demonstration of India's magnanimity and competence, New Delhi's recent large-scale assistance to its tsunami-stricken neighbors had illustrated the country's standing as a regional and emerging world power, according to observers here. India is particularly proud of its efforts in Sri Lanka, which it views as a sign of the strong bilateral relationship that Prime Minister Singh will play up during his planned March visit to Sri Lanka. One MEA contact described the GOI goal as "an EU kind of relationship" with Sri Lanka. From the Indian perspective, the tsunami has proved an overwhelming diplomatic success -- within South Asia, outside the region, and bilaterally with the US. End Summary.

Tsunami Public Diplomacy

SIPDIS

2. (C) Without a hint of bashfulness, six weeks after the disaster, the MEA published a polished, glossy review of India's relief efforts at home and abroad titled "Bridging the Ocean: India Leads Relief Measures in Tsunami-hit Areas." In a country-by-country overview of India's external aid, punctuated with photographs of Indian military personnel and hardware delivering assistance, the MEA explained that because of "a natural sense of affinity and...confidence in its capabilities," India was the first country to come to Sri Lanka's aid. The booklet, clearly intended for foreign audiences (one well-informed MEA interlocutor did not even know it existed), concluded that India's "management" of the tsunami has led to "a changed perception of the country in

SIPDIS

the eyes of the international community."

"Elephant Underground"

3. (C) South Asia expert Professor SD Muni commented to Poloff recently that India's aid for Sri Lanka further strengthens that relationship, as it was part of "a trend that was building all along." Muni did not attach much significance to the fact that India's relief in Sri Lanka was the country's first large-scale military deployment there since the unsuccessful 1989 Indian Peace Keeping Force action. The Indian armed forces were the logical choice because of their capabilities to accomplish such a mission, he countered, adding that in 2003 the Indian military also provided flood relief to its island neighbor. Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies researcher N. Manoharan offered a similar assessment, remarking that the military response was a "natural" one.

4. (C) Manoharan observed that although there was an "inherent power projection" in India's relief effort in Sri Lanka, Colombo was very appreciative. On the long term prognosis for India-Sri Lanka relations, he predicted that there will always be a view in Sri Lanka that India is the "elephant" in the neighborhood, and while that feeling is "underground" now, it may return. Following the tsunami, the sense in Sri Lanka was overwhelmingly positive, he concluded.

In Step With Colombo

5. (C) As evidence of the positive momentum between New Delhi and Colombo, MEA Joint Secretary (SAARC) V. Ashok highlighted to PolCouns and Poloff on February 16 the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) that he expects the Prime Minister will sign during his March trip to Sri Lanka. The CEPA, he explained, builds on the existing free trade agreement (FTA) between the two countries. It will include a reduction in the outstanding negative lists on both sides, the addition of trade in services, and harmonized standards and customs procedures. Describing this as phase two of the India-Sri Lankan partnership (with phase one having been the FTA) Ashok animatedly mapped out next stages after the CEPA, which would include national treatment for each other's investors, and the movement of professionals between the two countries, as well as the integration of electric and transportation grids. Describing the end point

as "an EU kind of relationship," Ashok praised Colombo's ability to consider economic development on a separate plane from the GOSL's political difficulties.

Tiger Watching

16. (C) While MEA Director (Bangladesh, Sri Lanka) TS Sandhu, in a January 7 conversation with PolCouns, had hoped for cooperation between the GOSL and LTTE in countering the tsunami, a month later he expressed concern that Sri Lankan

SIPDIS

President Kumaratunga may miss an opportunity to engage with the Tigers. Although he thought the February 7 attack on LTTE political leader E. Kausalyan did not bode well, Sandhu ventured that both the Tigers and government may be too exhausted to fight, possibly creating an opening for talks. Prominent foreign affairs commentator Maj. Gen. (retd) Ashok Mehta echoed Sandhu's dimming optimism on the tsunami-prompted prospects for peace in Sri Lanka. On

SIPDIS

February 10, he told Poloff that Kausalyan's death supported his belief that the common tragedy would not bring the GOSL and LTTE closer together. Gloomier still, the IPCS' Manoharan predicted that amidst claims of ethnic discrimination from Sri Lankan Tamils whom aid was not reaching, the tsunami had resulted in further division, rather than been an opportunity.

Regional Power

17. (C) Local strategists have also looked to capitalize on the perception that India "stood its ground" with the US, and asserted its own primacy in South Asia. In its tsunami relief publication, the MEA took care to point out that the Indian Navy arrived within hours of the disaster "at least a week before the US Marines reached there." Professor Muni argued to Poloff that despite the MEA's reassurances that the US and India coordinated successfully in Sri Lanka "eyebrows were raised" at the US' involvement in what the GOI considers "its soft belly." Muni paternalistically asserted that the GOI's position that New Delhi did not need foreign tsunami assistance, but would request it if that assessment changed, applied to Sri Lanka as well.

18. (C) Despite these barbs from some in the strategic community, the MEA, publicly stressed its close coordination with the US, highlighting New Delhi's selection for the Core Group as evidence of the country's equivalence with Japan and Australia: "recognizing the key role that India can play in the region, it was invited to be a part of the Tsunami Core Group put together by the United States." One senior MEA official complained to us in this context that academics like Muni will never believe the new reality of Indo-US partnership. Likewise, in a February 15 meeting with USAID Assistant Administrator Douglas Menarchik, MEA Joint Secretary (Americas) S. Jaishankar made the point that the

SIPDIS

"real test of US-India partnership will be our ability to coordinate in third countries."

Comment

19. (C) From the Indian perspective, the tsunami has been both a terrible tragedy and a diplomatic success -- within South Asia, outside the region, and bilaterally with the US. The Indians proved themselves to be effective at managing their relief efforts abroad, as well as their coordination with foreign governments. At the working level, MEA officials were cooperative and surprisingly forthcoming with information. New Delhi's strong performance during the disaster is the kind of evidence India has been looking for to support its claim that it is an international power and a benevolent neighbor. This role is particularly welcomed here with reference to Sri Lanka -- a country that India views as a model neighbor, with trade and other ties accelerating rapidly. In this context, the Indian Navy's exemplary performance in Sri Lanka is evidence that the ghosts of India's unsuccessful 1989 military intervention have now been laid to rest.

MULFORD